

Unit 1 Introduction

Christology

Introduction

Serious historians agree that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure who lived in first-century Israel. In comparison to other figures from the same period, the historical sources that attest to Him are plentiful. In light of this, the question that Jesus posed to His disciples in the Gospels—“Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:13-16; Mark 8:27-29; Luke 9:18-20)—requires a response from everyone. Was Jesus simply a prophet? A miracle-worker? A teacher? Or was He those things and something more?

The disciple Peter, along with the church throughout the ages, has confessed that He was—indeed, He is—something more. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Peter said (Matthew 16:16). Yet it took the disciples and the church time to understand the meaning of this confession. In many ways, the task of understanding this confession continues to this day, not only as theologians, pastors, and church leaders study and proclaim the person of Jesus, but as each of us reflects on who He is. The question—“Who do you say I am?”—is so crucial that it is worth meditating upon again and again. It can lead us to a deeper knowledge of Jesus, and, consequently, a deeper love for Him.

The Gospel of John

In the prologue of his gospel, John addresses this question with striking clarity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John applies the Greek term *Logos* (“the Word”) to Jesus. In the ancient world, philosophers understood the *Logos* (from which we get the English word “logic”) to be the rational principle that orders the universe. John says that the *Logos* that orders the universe is a person—Jesus. Jesus was with God the Father in the beginning and through Jesus all things were made. Not only that, Jesus is God. Specifically, He is the Son of the Father, who reveals the Father to creation (John 1:14, 17). From the outset, John wants us to know that Jesus is fully divine.

Later in the prologue, John makes another stunning claim: the divine *Logos*—the creator of all things—“became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In other words, the Son of God took on our human nature and lived in our midst as a real human being. This is the doctrine of the incarnation, which holds that in Jesus God himself was incarnate (from the Latin “in carne”, in the flesh). From the outset, John wants us to know that Jesus is fully divine and fully human.

These two truths about Jesus’ divinity and humanity are on beautiful display throughout the gospel. For example, in John’s gospel,

we find Jesus doing many things that only God can do: performing signs (like healing the sick, walking on water, feeding the multitudes, and raising Lazarus from the dead) as well as giving the Holy Spirit. We also find Jesus saying many things that point to His divine nature: for example, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Throughout the gospel, Jesus makes a series of “I am” statements that affirm His full divinity. Recall, when Moses asked God to reveal His name at the burning bush, God responded by saying, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). Whenever Jesus says “I am” in the gospel, He is thus revealing himself as God. For example, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you: before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58). Jesus is before Abraham because, as God, He is eternal. Jesus’ deeds and sayings, in the gospel, attest to His divine nature.

At the same time, throughout the gospel, the human nature of Jesus is also evident. The same one who declares “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) also, in reference to His human nature, declares “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). Because Jesus is God in human flesh, He participates in the things that characterize our human condition. In the encounter with the woman at the well, we find Jesus tired and thirsty (John 4:6). Later, when He sees Lazarus’ loved ones mourning after Lazarus’ death, we see Jesus troubled and weeping (John 11:33-35). During a final meal with His disciples, we notice Jesus assuming the role of a slave and washing His disciples’ feet. In the crucifixion, we observe Jesus experiencing betrayal, abuse, suffering, and ultimately, death. There is no doubt, in reading the gospel, that Jesus is a real human being, who truly participated in our humanity.

In summary, John’s answer to the question of “Who do you say I am?” is that Jesus is both God and man, fully divine and fully human. He is the *Logos* who took on human flesh. He is the Son of God who participated in our human condition, even our death. These two truths of Jesus’ divinity and humanity constitute the rule, or standard, for our Christological thinking.

The Early Church

The early church inherited from John’s gospel, and the New Testament as a whole, this dual affirmation about the person of Jesus. The early church centered its life on Jesus, confessing and worshipping the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord and God (John 20:28). Meditating on the question of “Who do you say I am?,” the early church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, came to increasingly precise articulations about the person of Jesus. Often, these articulations

were the result of the church responding to controversial teachings. Two controversies deserve particular attention because they helped the church develop its language about the person of Jesus.

In the early fourth century, a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, named Arius began teaching that “there was once when the Son was not.” Arius held that before the universe came into being, the Son of God was made. Hence, for him, there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. According to Arius, the Son of God was the highest of all creatures and inferior to God the Father. Arius’ bishop, Alexander, immediately saw the great danger in this line of thought. He argued against Arius that although the Son of God is begotten of the Father, He is not made and is not a creature. Drawing on John’s gospel, Alexander asserted that all things came into being through the Son, including time. The Son is eternal, just as the Father is eternal.

The controversy that Arius sparked was eventually addressed at the Council of Nicaea in 325. During this council, the early church set forth a creed that clarified the identity of Jesus. One paragraph of the Nicene Creed states:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being (*homoousios*) with the Father, through him all things were made.”

The council used the Greek term *homoousios* to clarify Jesus’ equality with the Father. The term means “of the same substance.” Jesus, the council said, is of the same substance or essence with God the Father. He is fully divine—“true God from true God.” The creed goes on to say that “for us and for our salvation he [Jesus] came down from heaven and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit ...” The early church understood that what was at stake in the teaching of Arius was nothing other than our salvation. If Jesus is not fully God, then we have no hope for salvation, for only God can save us.

In the early fifth century, another controversy arose about the person of Jesus. When Nestorius, a bishop in Constantinople, read the Gospels, he tried to divide the activities of Jesus according to the human and divine natures. For example, for Nestorius, it was the human nature of Jesus that was born, not the divine nature; it was the human nature of Jesus that became thirsty, not the divine nature. In doing this, Nestorius implied that there were two agents operating in Jesus and thus diminished the unity of Jesus’ person. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the church responded and provided a “definition of the faith.” One part reads:

“We confess one and the same Son, who is our Lord Jesus Christ,

and we all agree in teaching that this very same Son is complete in his deity, and complete—the very same—in his humanity.”

The definition goes on to say that the divine and human natures “come together in one person.” Chalcedon thus clarified, against Nestorius, that the two natures of Jesus cannot be so sharply divided that we lose sight of the fact that Jesus is one person.

Through these councils and others like them, the church continued to reflect on who Jesus is and developed language for faithfully speaking about Jesus as one person who is both fully divine and fully human.

The early church’s reflections on the person of Jesus were certainly technical and nuanced. Yet these reflections had huge implications for salvation. The early church understood that how we think about the person of Jesus has everything to do with our salvation. The relationship between Christology and salvation was often expressed in terms of the “great exchange.” The idea of the great exchange is that in Jesus God became like us so that we might become like God (Ephesians 5:1). God shared in our life so that we might share in God’s life. God participated in our human nature so that our human nature might be healed and exalted to the holiness and immortality of God’s nature (see 2 Corinthians 8:9 and 2 Peter 1:4). Our transformation is not possible, however, if divinity and humanity are not truly united in the one person of Jesus. Because Jesus is both God and man, we have the hope of transformation.

Conclusion

“Who do you say I am?” In unit 1, we invite you to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus, allowing the Gospel of John and the historic church to be your guide. Of course, to understand who Jesus is, we must not only think carefully; we must also draw close to Jesus himself. The early church believed that John was able to understand who Jesus is with such profound insight because he was close to Him personally, as illustrated in the reference to his reclining next to Jesus at the table (John 13:25). Like John, may we, too, find ourselves at the table, drawing close to Jesus, that we might come to know and love Him more.

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